

## [Did He Love Adventure?]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: DID HE LOVE ADVENTURE?

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Name of Person Interviewed Ned Harvin

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“William McAlister was run over by the mail train in Sumter and his left leg cut off”, was the shocking news that went flying about the little town of Manning, South Carolina, forty-four years ago. The next day, this useful and influential citizen died, leaving an aged mother and four little children, who were dependent on him. The youngest, William Jr., was three years old, and his 2 mother had died only three months prior to this accident. Left without parents or home, he went to live with his uncle, who owned a home between the Congaree and Wateree Rivers, near their junction.

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About thirty years later, the newspapers contained a story about William McAlister, the facts of which ran something like this: Due to very heavy rains, the Broad River was in flood stage. A fellow named Watson and his two boys went out in a small boat to rescue a coop of chickens for a neighbor. Their motor was drowned, and they were stranded more than a half mile from land. Mrs. Watson, who had taken them to the swamp in their car, waited anxiously all night for their return. When morning came, disappointed and frantic, she carried the news to Columbia. Just as soon as William McAlister heard about this, he got three other men together and started for the swamp.

In desperation the men had clung to staunch swamp trees, around which swirling waters raced from Friday afternoon till Saturday afternoon. The water was still raging when the McAlister party reached the scene. Only the tops of telephone poles could be seen. But they started out, not knowing what the result would be. For a time it seemed a hopeless task; however, obstacle after obstacle was overcome. They were within a few feet of the frightened men, when they found they could not move another foot. Watson saw their predicament, however, dropped into the raging water, caught hold of a drift log that was wedged in the tree they had climbed, and made his way, hand over hand, to the boat. William and Joe followed their father, and in little more than an hour after the rescue party had left the swamp, all seven men were safe on the bank again.

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It was February, and rain had fallen steadily for several days. Equipped with umbrella and raincoat, I went to spend an evening with the McAlisters, who lived only a block away.

Mrs. McAlister, a perfect blonde, was lovely in a blue shirtwaist dress that evening. Gentle and enduring, she is also capable.

"We're so glad you've come over. We want to have a game of Chinese checkers," Mrs. McAlister said. "We are so tired of the rain."

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"Looks as if we're going to have another flood," I suggested. "Want to rescue some more folks, William?"

"Well, I'm not wanting to see anybody in distress. I'd gladly go after them again. I am expecting to be called out any minute to pull somebody out o' the mud. These streets are awful where they're paving. I was just laughing about an experience I had in the flood of 1908. I an a sort of swamp bird by nature, you see. Uncle Ben had a 1500-acre plantation, and 500 of it was on an island, Buckhead, about two miles from the house. This was pasture land, and Uncle Ben raised livestock on that island - horses, cows, sheep, goats, hogs, and everything. Well, sir, when those rains descended and the floods came that September, even Buckhead was covered with water, the first and only time that thing has ever happened.

"About 3 o'clock one afternoon, Uncle Ben called to me, "William, the river has risen a foot in the last hour. Get up a crowd of Negroes, and bring everything up to the house quick as you can."

"I was about sixteen and had plenty of the don't-give-a-darn spirit. I took some Negroes and went out in a flat with an outboard motor to haul in the sheep, goats, and hogs. The horses and cows had to swim, and occasionally a cow would give out. Then we'd have to tie 4 a rope around her horns and tie her head to a tree, trying to keep her head above the water. One of the cows gave plum out, and I called out, 'Boy Wilson, jump out the boat and get that cow. She's drowning. Tie her head up quick.'

"Hell, no. I ain't gittin' outer no boat to-night, Cap'n. Dat water too black an' col' an' I scared, Boss. 'Clare to God, I —— '

"With that I hauled away and knocked him overboard. Instead of going to the cow, he went to the bottom and didn't come up - only some bubbles on the water. I sat there scared half to death. I grabbed a pipe pole we had in the boat and run it down where he went

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over. Finally, after what seemed hours to me, up come Boy Wilson. He had fallen in a well, the curb of which had been washed away, and he had an awful time getting out. But I've always had a warm place in my heart for Negroes. 'Course we used to fight, an' all that. Uncle Ben always told me if I ever let a Negro whip me, he'd give me another one when he heard about it. One time I was sure I was in for two whippings.

"The cook's boy was named Bull-Ox, and we just had to fight every now and then. But he could just about handle me. One day we were chopping cotton, and Bull-Ox called me a liar. I waded in on him, He wallowed me in that dirt, over and over; he liked to beat me to death. So Uncle Ben gave me three days to beat Bull-Ox.

"As luck would have it, the next day we were dipping guano out of the same sack with two condensed milk cans and putting it in buckets to be carried to the distributor. This time Bull-Ox called me a damn liar, an' I lit in on him proper that time. It was the worst fight 5 I ever had in my life. And all the time I was remembering that I was to get another beating if I let him whip me. Finally I got him down and tied his hands behind his back. Then I picked up the sack, which was about empty, pulled it over his head, tied it under his chin, and hit the ball to the house. 'All right, Uncle Ben, I've whipped that damn nigger at last. Come on, lemme show you.'"

"Don't cuss, Bill. I'll whip you for that!" Uncle Ben said. He followed me to the field, took the sack off the Negroe's head, and I thought he'd sneeze himself to death. But I had beat the nigger, and after that he was careful what he said to me.

"Those were great days for me. I fished and hunted, morning, noon, and night. Uncle Ben planted acres and acres of peas, and it was no uncommon thing to see thirty coveys of birds in one afternoon. I had two dogs, Burt and Lottie, and, for my twelfth birthday, Uncle Ben gave me a gun. Pretty soon, one November day just before Thanksgiving, I was hunting in a broom sedge field. Lottie flushed the birds. I know she sensed danger. Her bushy hair stood on ends; her left leg shook as she held it up in the air. I moved towards

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her and saw a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. I shot away without taking aim. I must have blown it into fifty pieces. It had twelve rattles and one button, which I put in my little trunk and kept for years. I've killed dozens of snakes, but never have I been so thrilled over killing one."

The 'phone rang. "The corner of Blanding and Marion? Okay, I'll be right up, old boy. "—" Ruth, somebody's had a wreck. Don't think I'll have to be gone long. Good-by.

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"Bill does love to talk about his life on the farm, and now, since he's losing his hearing, he likes it even more," Mrs. McAlister remarked. "He's always loved people a lot, and he misses the joy of conversation terribly. He thinks the noise of motors had something to do with his deafness; but I'm not sure of that. He has a brother who is stone deaf, and we both fear he'll grow worse as he grows older. He and Nell are real pals. I wish he could persuade her to go out with him more. She is too studious and ambitious for her own good."

Nell, a lovely teen-age girl, had been reading French and had taken little interest in the talking back and forth. "Mumsie, darling, it's about time for me to go. You've come to a poor subject now. No, really, I can't study quite as well here, and I'm going to my room. Good-night to you both."

"I found her reading parallel this morning at 3:30," Mrs. McAlister continued. "She's been doing extra practicing for the county music contests, and now she has the State one to look forward to. Love her music? I should say she does. I don't know how many medals and certificates she has won. She won a scholarship to the Northfleet School of Music in New York last year, but she was not a high school graduate and couldn't go. We hope she can go this next year, though.

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"Tell me something about Rebecca," I asked. "When I last heard of her, she was a charming debutante, dancing, singing, and reading at every social function in Columbia."

"She's still singing, but it's lullabies these days. It was a great disappointment to us that Beck fell so in love with Bob Nardin <sup>7</sup> that nothing else but a marriage would satisfy her. We had high hopes of a real career for her after the year's study with Madame Schumann in New York. But I'm beginning to feel that, after all, perhaps the making of a home is more important than a career. They have a darling baby, and are very happy in their new apartment in Beaufort, where Bob has a good job. Did you see my hyacinths? I've had a birthday recently, and Bill always likes to bring me flowers to accompany the check. 'Hyacinths to feed the soul! his card read."

Mr. McAlister returned from his trip to the wreck. "Nobody hurt, Ruth. I'll get the cars in tomorrow and adjust the insurance. Those fellows told me the six prisoners have been reprieved. I haven't read the Record today. Have you seen about it?"

"No. I hadn't even heard it, but I'm glad. You know you and I do not agree on the subject of capital punishment."

"Well, if we can't control crime with it, what would we do without it, I'm wondering. I not only believe in it with all my soul, but I think every man should see one execution, at least. I've seen three, and it should teach a valuable lesson, I'm telling you."

"Oh, I see. That accounts for my having such an ideal husband, does it? I may have to change my mind about electrocutions yet, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't say just that alone. All those floggings I got when I was a boy must have added a little something to my make-up. They started back in that one-room school house in the sandhills. If the rabbit hunt ended on time, I was always there for roll call; if not, it was too bad.

"Then when high school was the order, I had to be on time, for I had the job of carrying those twenty-five or thirty kids back and forth to Eastover every day. That bugle my uncle gave me, with the blood from the Spanish-American War on it, called them out to 'battle' every morning, and I got a big thrill out of the summoning. What grade was I in? Lord, I don't know. I was supposed to be in the eighth or ninth, but I reckon I really was in the third.

"The next year, Uncle Ben sent me to Prof. A. R. Banks. I stayed there one year, then went to the university. Nothing at the university interested me, except football. That year Carolina beat Clemson, and I helped do it. But, when the season was over, I 'quituated.' I went in for wrestling matches and won about everything.

"Money hadn't been any consideration to me up to that time. My father had three houses in Manning, and the rent on them had about paid my expenses. Uncle Ben and Aunt Hallie had been strict as the mischief with me, and I hadn't had anything to throw to birds. Now the Gregory-Conder Motor Company offered me a job and paid me six dollars a week, three of which I paid for board. They kept raising me till I got sixty dollars a month. Got married on that salary."

"Bill, do let me tell Martha about our courtship," Mrs. McAlister cut in. "We lived about seven miles in the country, and one day mother, grandfather and I came to Columbia to spend the day with the Garners, driving Lord Leland, our bay horse. At the table, Mr. Garner offered to send some one to take us to ride in a car. That was in 1911. He sent Bill."

"And I sold a Buick and bought me a wife, the best day's business I ever did," rejoined Bill. "I took an Oakland first, but the boss told 9 me to sell the Buick, if possible. So I loosened a spark plug, and that Oakland skipped and bucked worse then a mule. So they fell for the

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Buick. The price was \$1,750, and Mrs. Burns sold three of her best horses and gave me a check.

"The next problem was to get some one to teach all those good looking girls to drive. After a week, I told the boss they were the bone-headedest crowd I had ever seen, and it would take me at least another week. You know the rest. We went to the Methodist parsonage one hot afternoon, July 13, 1913, and the knot was tied. We moved all our possessions - a forty-dollar wood stove, an electric iron, and a cow to our little brown house, which wasn't paid for, of course. But we both worked mighty hard and saved every penny. Ruth, you remember the first car we bought? Paid ten dollars for it, an old Busch. And, while you held the lantern, I overhauled it at night and sold it for sixty dollars.

"How long have I been interested in machinery? Ever since I can remember. I used to collect tin cans, pieces of iron, old plows and hoes, and everything I could find and build ginhouses and sawmills, with real honest-to-goodness smokestacks and boilers. It's a wonder I hadn't got blown up or burnt up.

"I grew tired of working for the other fellow and wanted to work for myself, so I rented a storeroom for a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month and paid in advance. When I was cleaning it up, I got a blister on this right hand. Infection. I was laid up for six weeks or more. Then soon as I got to work again, the war was on, and it looked like I'd be put in the second class and shot straight to France. But I 10 got forth class and never was called.

"Prices shot up, and we made some money. I remember one day Ruth came to the shop and said, 'Bill, I want four hundred dollars.' I thought she had lost her mind. But I happened to have it in the bank, and, of course, she went home with a check. Later, I was discussing buying a \$10,000-lot, and she said, 'I can furnish \$7,000 of it.' This time, I knew she had lost her mind. But I be-dog if she didn't fish it out of banks, mattresses, and every crack and crevice till she counted the amount. Taught me a valuable lesson in saving, too. Then we mortgaged the little brown house for \$2,750 and made the first payment on



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this one. That was Friday, the 13th of February, and we moved in on Friday, the 13th of March.”

“Are you folks just plain superstitious or good Presbyterians and believe in predestination?” I asked.

“Both, I guess. Bill's been a deacon in our church for ten years, and the rest of us try to be good as we can,” Mrs. McAlister said, as she laughed.

“The secret of my success, if I've had any,” Bill McAlister told us, as he lit another cigarette, “lies in the fact that I try to be thoroughly honest in all my dealings with people. Then the volume of business I do, I think, has something to do with it. I employ eleven men, and we're all kept busy all the time, day and night, if we're needed. I am out a lot of the time, appraising and adjusting insurance premiums on wrecked cars, for which I am paid twenty-five dollars a day.

“I had a thrilling experience several years ago. A man's car fell 11 over an embankment into water a hundred feet deep. A week passed, and nobody had located it. The owner wired from Charleston for a diver and his assistant, and we went to pull it out for him. Soon as I reached the place, I noticed bubbles of oil coming up every now and then on the water. Right away I said, 'That's where you'll find the car.' We rowed to the spot, and the diver went down. He telephoned, 'Buick. Cable tied securely to car. Coming up.' We pulled her out, and I repaired the car for a hundred and seventy-five dollars.

“But I think if I had my life to live over, I'd go in for professional athletics. Those fellows make a lot of money. When I was married, I had in my pocket a signed registration certificate to go into automobile racing, at a salary of one hundred dollars a race. But this little lady put an end to that, in short order. And I'm glad she did, for that's dangerous business, I'm telling you. Then I raced boats for a time. Now that's a thing that thrills. But I had one experience that came so near being serious, I promised my wife and the children

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I wouldn't go in any more, even for a \$500 prize. But I haven't quit loving adventure. And neither have I quit loving a good joke and a hearty laugh.

“Several years ago, on a night about like this one, when ghosts walk around and spooks are behind every bush, Manigault, the Negro embalmer, called me about 11:00 o'clock.

“Mr. McAlister, I've got a hearse stuck in the Wateree swamp. They went over to Sumter to take a dead man, and can't pull out. I want you to go after him. Can you go right away?"

“Oh, yes, Manigault. I think I can get him out all right. Fact is, I will get him out. But I will be glad if you'll send a man over 12 to go with me, if you've got one round there.'

“Boss, you ain't scared to go by yourself, are you?"

“No, Manigault. I thought you knew I wasn't scared of the devil, much less ghosts. But it's been raining mighty hard, and I understand that swamp's in mighty bad condition. So I think I may need some help.'

“Oh, all right, sir. I got a man here, and I'll send him right over.'

“So we got started pretty soon. We saw the hearse about ten miles from Columbia, and all lights were still burning. I couldn't resist having some fun; so I said, 'George, drive the truck quietly as you can right on by the hearse, we've got to turn around anyway,' When we were some distance beyond, I told him, 'Now you go up to the hearse, I'll go with you, and you shake it as hard as you can, saying in a deep, hoarse voice, 'This is Mike. This is Mike. I done come back to life. I done come back to life. Let me in.'

“There were two Negroes in the hearse, and they were both fast asleep. The little Negro went straight through the glass doors, without even a broken skin, and was followed by the big one. They both ran through mud, jumped over logs, and straight through puddles of water. When we did finally stop them, they were at least a quarter of a mile away. Scared?"

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My soul, I never saw anybody so scared. I thought we'd never get'em quiet enough to drive the hearse back to Columbia. Fact is, George had to ride back with 'em."